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OUTLOOK ON EUROPE

A EUROPEAN CULTURAL IDENTITY? HERITAGE AND SHARED HISTORIES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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ABSTRACT

Do the people in the European Union share a cultural identity? One important aspect of cultural identity is shared histories or common memories. Such histories can be presented by heritage. Heritage is those traces of the past a society chooses to preserve. Heritage is therefore also a way of defining oneself. To this day, the European Union has not yet compiled its own list of heritage. This paper analyses the World Heritage Sites of EU member states: sites that are considered to be of universal value. When taken together, what image of European history do these sites represent?

Key words: Cultural identity, heritage, World Heritage List, European Union

INTRODUCTION

After the recent additions the European Union consists of 27 countries.¹ In the near future the admission of Turkey and a number of Balkan countries will be discussed. The application of Turkey is an issue, not only because of its size and its relatively low income per capita, but also because it raises questions about the definition of Europe. Political and public debate on Turkey's membership focuses on matters of culture and identity. This argument implies that there is a EU culture, a shared set of meanings (De Pater 2003) throughout the European Union. It suggests an imagined community of Europeans, with common histories and symbols for a clearly delineated territory (Anderson 1983; McNeill 2004, pp. 38–40) and with a sense of a common destiny (Smith 1990 quoted in Van der Vaart 2003).

Each of these aspects is problematic. It is, to start with the point about territoriality, extremely difficult to define the borders of Europe. 'Natural borders', which are a mental construction anyway, are very difficult to identify in the case of Europe. In fact Europe is an integral part of the Eurasian landmass and is only seen as a separate continent for historical reasons (Lewis & Wigen 1997). To complicate matters further, the European Union might never unite the whole of Europe. On the other hand, Turkey, only partly situated in Europe, is a serious candidate for the European Union.

A common destiny seems to be lacking as well. The rejection of the Euro currency by the citizens of Denmark and the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty by the people of both France and the Netherlands are ample illustrations. Whereas the individual countries all have their sets of national symbols, symbols for

Europe are, at best, developing. During the last decades, the Council of Europe and, later, the European Union, have worked hard to develop European symbols: a hymn, a flag, a currency, government buildings.

HERITAGE AND HISTORY

In this Outlook on Europe paper, the authors explore one part of the cultural identity of Europe: its shared histories and heritage. This poses large problems, as neither histories nor heritage are defined on a European level. While a number of European states, for example the Netherlands (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2006), have recently worked on a list of basic features for their national historical stories, at the European level such a list does not (yet) exist. A European list of important heritage does not exist either. The question whether Europe would need such a list was discussed earlier in this journal (Ashworth & Graham 1997).

Before going into more detail, the relation between history and heritage needs to be discussed. Heritage is 'that part of the past which we select in the present for contemporary purposes' (Graham *et al.* 2000, p. 2). This means that heritage has less to do with the past than with the present. Nevertheless, history and heritage are related. Many buildings, landscapes and pieces of art are seen as heritage because they refer to certain historic periods, persons or events. Heritage can act as a symbol and refer to stories of history.

Heritage however does not (re)present the whole history. A disproportionate number of objects that are preserved as heritage, date from specific epochs (Renes 2006). In periods of demographic and economic growth, new lands were reclaimed and new buildings erected. Periods of stagnation and decline, however, are characterised by reuse, repair and small adaptations of existing buildings and landscape features. Heritage sites are therefore likely to date from periods of growth. The selection of heritage sites further strengthens this emphasis, as periods of 'glory' are more amenable for representation purposes than periods of decline. In general, heritage presents the 'desired' history, rather than the complex and often dissonant results of scientific historical research.

In fact, the idea of preserving material traces of the past has European roots. During the Middle Ages fortifications and buildings from the Roman Period were preserved, mainly because they added prestige to medieval rulers (Renes 2007). The modern preservation movement started in the late nineteenth century with Romantic authors such as John Ruskin. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most European countries developed policies for protecting ancient buildings, archaeological sites and landscapes. The European ideas on heritage became more or less generally accepted, for example in the Venice Charter that emphasises material aspects of heritage. However, in other parts of the world, other traditions exist. For many non-Europeans, heritage consists not of stones but of ideas or oral traditions (see for example, Chung 2005). In recent years, UNESCO has developed a World List of Intangible Heritage.

Most lists of preserved heritage are created at a national or even local scale. However, UNESCO's World Heritage List (WHL) is quite popular and has developed into the premier league of conservation. The compilation of the List started in 1972 'to encourage the identification, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding value to humanity' (UNESCO 2006a). To reach World Heritage status, an object needs to meet a number of criteria (see Box 1). As each country makes its own proposals,² this repertoire of sites might predominantly be about how individual countries, or even regions within countries, wish to represent their history and culture to an international stage. On the other hand, it is the only list that is available on a supranational level. Furthermore, the List does contain a number of transnational sites, acting as symbols of international co-operation. Therefore, it is possible to use the World Heritage List as an indication of shared histories within the European Union.

WORLD HERITAGE SITES IN THE EU

The EU member states account for 286 sites³ of the total of 830 sites on the list. The majority of these sites are man-made: only 14 sites fulfil the 'natural' criteria and another seven sites meet both natural and cultural criteria. The sites run

Box 1. *UNESCO's criteria for universal value of cultural objects*

- (i) represent a masterpiece of human creative genius;
- (ii) exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design;
- (iii) bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilisation which is living or which has disappeared;
- (iv) be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history;
- (v) be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change;
- (vi) be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance.

from very old to quite recent. Some sites are prehistoric, for example, the decorated caves of the Vézère Valley (France) or the Neolithic settlement of Choirokoitia (Cyprus) dating as far back as the seventh millennium BC. On the other hand, the town of Le Havre has been inscribed for the way it was rebuilt after the Second World War. The European Union is therefore presented as an area with a long history and with a great cultural historical legacy. This matches the common notion of Europe as the 'old world'.

Almost every list of protected heritage is unbalanced in a number of ways. In general, the elites are overrepresented. This is partly due to the durability of elite buildings compared to the humbler buildings of the majority of the population. Those who designate heritage are to blame for these biases as well. In most countries the selection of (world) heritage is a rather undemocratic activity, done by small groups of experts (mainly art historians) and politicians. Art historians usually select heritage using aesthetic and historical criteria instead of, for example, socio-economic criteria (Renes 2006). The World Heritage List is no exception to this rule. Religious buildings are the largest category among European World Heritage objects (24%), followed by palaces and other elite housing (7%). Military (4%) and industrial objects (3%) as well as agrarian landscapes are weakly represented.

Geographically the World Heritage List is unbalanced as well (Van der Aa *et al.* 2002). Europe as a whole is grossly overrepresented on the list,

which is an aspect UNESCO is increasingly aware of (Van Oers 2003). Within Europe almost half of the 286 sites are situated in just four countries: Italy (40), Spain (39), Germany (31) and France (30).

SHARED HISTORIES?

A closer examination of the World Heritage List shows some remarkable tendencies that refer to perceived (or desired) shared histories. Almost a third of the World Heritage sites in the European Union are historic (inner) cities, archaeological remains of cities or specific squares or areas in cities. Rural heritage is scarce. Only Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic each listed a rural settlement. Some of the cultural landscapes (a category that was added to the World Heritage List in 1992 and contains 10% of the sites in the European Union) are rural or agricultural as well, notably wine-producing regions such as the Alto Douro Wine Region (Portugal) and the Tokaj Wine Region (Hungary). The emphasis on cities is remarkable. Towns existed in many parts of Asia before they emerged in Europe. Moreover, most of European history has been rural; around 1750 the Low Countries were the only region in Europe in which more than one third of the population lived in cities (Epstein 2001). However, as heritage sites towns can act as symbols of economic integration.

Economic integration took place in stages (see Box 2). Wallerstein described how, during the Early Modern Period, most of Europe integrated

Box 2. *A shortened historical geography of Europe**Selection of WHL sites*

The history of Europe can be briefly summarised by describing the different eras of growth and decline and by showing the long-term movement of the centre of gravity.

During the Age of the Roman Empire half of Europe was united within a single empire.

After the Age of the Roman Empire of political and economic integration, a severe crisis erupted in different parts of Europe between the third and seventh centuries. During the seventh to ninth centuries, the more dynamic economies could be found on the fringes of Europe: Byzantium, Muslim Spain, Ireland and Scandinavia.

From the tenth century onwards Northwest and Central Europe embarked on a long period of growth. This was shown not only in reclamations and in the recovery of towns in the region itself, but also in expansion and colonisation, from England into Ireland, from France into Spain and from the German lands into Eastern Europe. Economic integration led to specialisation and to the emergence of the urban core-regions in Northern Italy and Flanders, giving rise to a bi-polar structure in Europe.

This period was followed by a long crisis during the fourteenth and the first half of the fifteenth century, in which many thousands of settlements were deserted. The fifteenth century is also the period of the Renaissance which originates in Italy.

The 'long sixteenth century' was again a period of growth and integration. During this period the northern core region, the centre of which moved from Flanders to Holland, outclassed the southern core and became the prime centre of an emerging European world-system.

After another period of stagnation between 1650 and 1750, the next round of economic growth heralded the Industrial Revolution that started in the British Isles, the new economic core. The Industrial Revolution reached the Continent in the beginning of the nineteenth century. For more than a century, until the First World War, Europe remained the leading world power.

'Roaring twenties' are followed by a world crisis which is followed by the Second World War. After the war Europe is surpassed by the United States as the major world power.

In the second half of the twentieth century Europe was divided into two large blocks, separated by the Iron Curtain. After 1989 there are growing attempts at unification. Europe is still an important global economic power. Its heritage makes it into the world's main cultural theme park for international tourists.

Roman frontier sites (UK, Germany), other Roman remains (Italy, Spain, Germany, France).

(Byzantium) churches and abbeys in for example Greece and Ireland, Moorish sites in Spain. Viking sites in Scandinavia.

Romanesque and gothic cathedrals, urbanised regions (Italian and Flemish towns, belfries of Belgium and France), Hansa towns, other medieval towns. Pilgrim routes.

Italy: architecture (Vicenza) and 'ideal' towns of the Renaissance (Pienza, Ferrara).

Beemster (Netherlands); colonial sites (Seville, Belem).

Cradle sites of Industrial Revolution (England, Wales, Scotland). Gardens in baroque (Versailles, Schönbrunn) and landscape style (Stourhead, Wörlitz).

Modern architecture/International style (Bauhaus sites in Dessau and Weimar, Tugendhat villa in Brno and Rietveld-Schröder house in Utrecht). Auschwitz.

The only postwar object is the town of Le Havre as it was rebuilt after the war (1945–1964).

into one economic system and became the core of the 'European world-system' (Wallerstein 1980). During the seventeenth century, Holland was the core of this system; afterwards the centre moved to England. Some of the Dutch World Heritage sites refer to this short-lived core position. In an earlier stage, the later Middle Ages, the Hansa formed a trade network in north-eastern Europe. Hanseatic towns in Germany, Estonia, Latvia, Poland and Sweden are inscribed on the World Heritage List. Some historians have described the Hansa as colonisers and monopolists and especially in the socialist countries the Hansa has often been described in negative terms. In recent years, however, it has become popular in large parts or the Baltic because it symbolises the historical relations of some of the new EU member states with Western Europe.

Political integration is a more problematic issue. More recent attempts at political and military integration by Napoleon and Nazi Germany are still too controversial to act as symbols for European unification. Less controversial is the Roman Empire, mainly because it undertook its imperialistic activities a long time ago. Moreover, the Romans still attract admiration for their military and organisational skills. Their architectural and town-building activities, showing a great deal of standardisation, are easily recognisable. Although the Roman Empire was, in fact, more a Mediterranean than a European empire, it seems to gain importance as a European symbol. The World Heritage List contains Roman sites in Italy, France, Germany and the UK. The site of Hadrian's Wall, part of the Roman border in the North of England, has recently been extended to parts of the German *Limes* and will be further extended with the Antonine Wall in Scotland. In the future, all Roman border fortifications, from Scotland to the Black Sea, might become one European World Heritage site.

For the last two thousand years, the Christian church has attempted to unify Europe in cultural terms. Christianity did not originate in Europe but, building upon the organisation of the Roman Empire, has tried throughout the Middle Ages to become a Europe-wide organisation. Christian monasteries, cathedrals and other churches make up almost a quarter of World Heritage sites in the European Union (Figure 1).⁴ Particularly interesting is the large

number of (partly) gothic churches on the World Heritage List: Amiens, Bourges, Reims, Chartres, Mont Saint Michel, Canterbury, Tournai, Trier, Cologne, Burgos, etc. The gothic architectural style was developed during the first half of the twelfth century in the towns of the Paris Basin, the central places in the grain-growing region that became rich in a period of population pressure. From this core region the style spread out over large parts of Europe. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the gothic style was seen as the symbol of the heydays of Christianity and became popular again. Together, these churches suggest a Christian continent. Some doubt is justified, as Europe has never been completely Christian. Parts of Europe were not converted before the late Middle Ages. Jews have been part of European culture since Roman times and since the eighth century, Muslims have been part of European history as well. Muslims ruled parts of Spain and southern Italy and, later, the Balkans. Only Spain listed a number of former Moorish sites, on the Balkans the Ottoman period seems largely absent.

Shared histories are not only about similar sites or common themes in the listed sites. They have much to do with the presentation of sites, of heritage and history as well. On the UNESCO web site a number of heritage sites are presented as exemplary or illustrative of a certain era. Other sites are placed in a spatial context. Sites are seen as exemplary of developments or phenomena present in larger regions, for example the Baltic, the Mediterranean or Eastern Europe. This suggests that these sub-European regions have their own shared histories. Relations between areas or countries are revealed when sites are described as crossroads or meeting places or when external and outward influences are indicated. This shows that there are historic relations between the countries and people in Europe. It also means that not all countries use World Heritage solely for national glorification, in which case influence by other nations would not be emphasised. Still, some countries (notably the Netherlands and Portugal) focus predominantly on national history.

EUROPE AS A CENTRE OF INNOVATION

Many sites have been selected because they are considered to be unique or, at least, very good

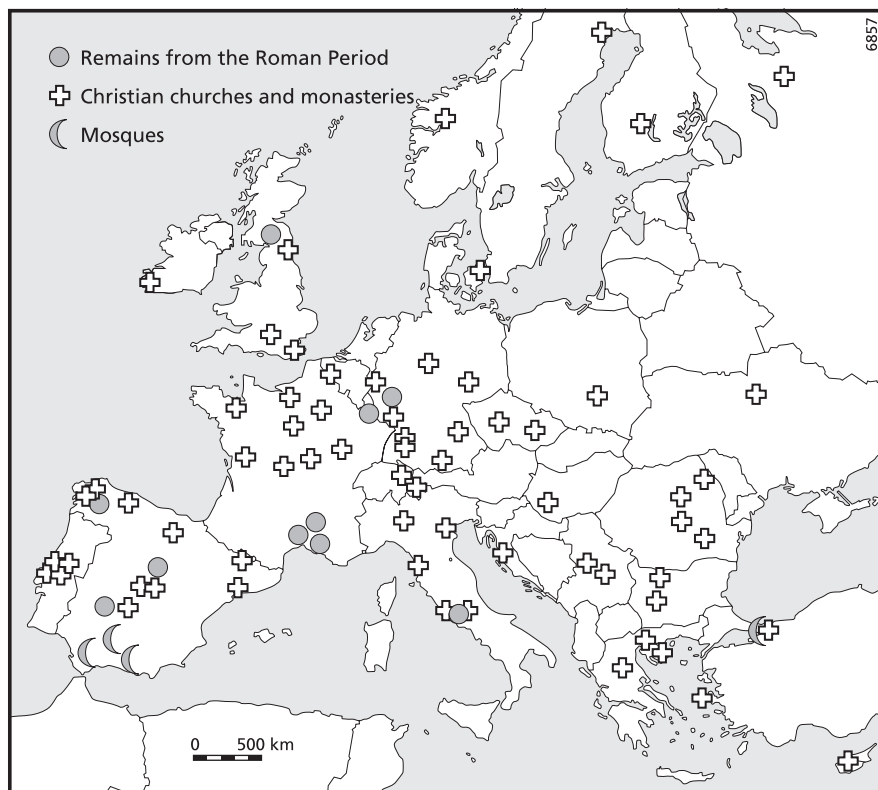


Figure 1. Roman, Christian and Muslim objects on the World Heritage List in Europe.

examples of periods or developments in history. The second criterion in Box 1 takes a different point of view. Heritage can also refer to developments that started in a certain region or place and subsequently became important within a much larger region. One possible example of such innovations is gothic architecture, which started around Paris and became a characteristic of churches in large parts of the world.

A number of sites seem to represent what Europe contributed to humanity: European inventions or developments that influenced other parts of the world. The most important examples are the Classical culture, the expansion of the European world system (including the colonial project), and the Industrial Revolution. Smaller European innovations with a global reach were humanistic town planning, baroque and landscape gardens and modern

architecture of the early twentieth century. All of these inventions are present in the World Heritage List. Box 2 mentions a selection of sites representing such innovations.

DISCUSSION

Individual countries prepare their own proposals for UNESCO's World Heritage List. This makes the list prone to national glorification. An analysis of the 286 sites listed by EU members shows that there are some shared European histories. Europe presents itself as an urbanised, Christian continent with a long history.

The World Heritage sites were used in this paper as the European Union still lacks its own heritage list. However, in recent years there seems to be a growing interest in symbols for Europe as a whole (Figure 2).⁵ This interest may be



Figure 2. *Zamosc, pictured in 1992.*

connected to the amalgamation of the European Union. The recent designation or proposal of a number of transnational sites, such as the Roman frontier fortifications, the Franco-Belgian belfries and the Struve Geodetic Arc (a chain of nineteenth century survey triangulations stretching from Hammerfest in Norway to the Black Sea, through ten countries and over 2,820 km) show this tendency.

Compiling a heritage list for the European Union will not be easy. Heritage is eventually about representation and constructing identities. One, therefore, always has to ask question such as: 'what heritage?', 'whose heritage?' and 'which groups are represented or forgotten?' Examples presented in this paper show that the current image Europe presents is biased. Europe is characterised by diversity. Especially in East Central Europe, a mixture of religious and ethnic groups within continuously changing political boundaries has characterised most of European history. The relations between these groups have not always been peaceful. Heffernan (1998) demonstrated how and to what degree Europe and European identity were shaped by wars. The designated site of Auschwitz and the proposed site of Mauthausen are exceptional relics of one of the darkest

pages in European history. To present a less biased image of its history, Europe will have to designate more relics of its troubled past and of its minorities.

Notes

1. This overview is based on the World Heritage List as published on the official website (UNESCO 2006c). The analysis was made in the summer and autumn of 2006 and therefore refers to the European Union of 25 member states and to the sites listed by summer 2006.
2. Countries that have signed the World Heritage Convention can nominate sites they think are of universal value to humanity. Criteria used by UNESCO are divided into N (nature) and C (culture). There are 4 possible nature criteria and 6 culture criteria (UNESCO 2006d). The proposals are evaluated by a committee (ICOMOS for cultural heritage and IUCN for natural heritage), after which the World Heritage committee eventually decides whether a site will be listed (UNESCO 2006b). The whole World Heritage List (830 sites) contains 162 sites listed for nature criteria and 24 sites for a combination of nature and culture criteria.
3. The EU Member States are home to 286 sites of the total of 830 sites. Note that the number of sites

of each member state cannot be simply added, as there are shared sites, for example Muskauer park (Poland and Germany) and the caves of Aggtelek Karst and Slovak Karst (Hungary and Slovakia). Within the European Union there are 7 sites shared between two or more member states.

4. The overrepresentation of historic cities and Christianity is present in the World Heritage List as a whole, partly because of the large number of European sites (Van Oers 2003).
5. The World Heritage Site of Zamosc in southeast Poland shows the importance of 'desired history'. The town is presented as a piece of art that illustrates the cultural unity of Europe, thereby denying the very troubled history of the town. Zamosc was founded in the sixteenth century by the chancellor Jan Zamojsky and designed as an 'ideal city' by the Italian architect Bernardo Morando. On the UNESCO website, Zamosc is described as a perfect example of a late-sixteenth-century Renaissance town, which has retained its original layout and fortifications and a large number of buildings that combine Italian and central European architectural traditions (<<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/564>>; January 2007). About the Second World War, the description only mentions that the town escaped destruction. However, Zamosc had a very troubled history. In 1939 Zamosc had 28,000 inhabitants, including 10,000 Jews (Rosa Luxemburg was born here). A few years later, the town was renamed Himmlerstadt and became the first SS-colony in Poland. The population of the town and the surrounding region was deported and partly murdered, after which 25,000 to 30,000 ethnic Germans were settled there. Partisans and the Red Army ended the short-lived experiment. Now the town has an almost exclusively Polish population (Mak 2004, pp. 520–523).

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